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**Distance Learning Course Design Expectations in China and the United Kingdom**

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***Abstract***

Many British Universities are establishing joint academic programmes with foreign partners. In some cases, delivery is by distance learning mode. Studies comparing distance learning to face-to-face learning are many, but are generally contextualised within a single academic culture and little reference is given to differences in academic culture between deliverers and receivers where they are continents apart. This paper aims to shed some light on the issue by providing insight into the implications of differences between Chinese and UK academic culture for distance learning. The paper is based on a pedagogic research project, a case study, and is centred on a distance learning course in maritime law proposed by a British university for a university in China. Some important commonalities and gaps between perceptions of deliverers and receivers of the proposed course were identified that are specifically attributable to issues of culture. These cannot be dismissed as trivial and unimportant. Therefore, based on the data from two focus groups, Chinese students and UK academics, the authors include recommendations about how one might enhance the effectiveness of distance learning where such cultural issues exist.

***Keywords:***

Distance learning,  
Cross-cultural issues,  
British higher education,  
China

## 1. Introduction

Under the current climate of internationalisation of higher education, many universities are establishing academic programmes with foreign partners. In some collaborations where programmes are delivered abroad, the delivery method may include elements of distance learning. To make the learning and teaching approaches employed in the programmes inclusive and learner-centred, at a time when students and educators are becoming increasingly aware of pedagogical differences in one and other's culture (Zhou, 2006), the design of distance learning should be 'responsive to the needs of students as individuals' (Plymouth University, p.6).

As discussed in detail below, there have been a number of studies that address differences in various academic cultures, particularly those that refer to Chinese culture in the context of distance learning. Smith and Smith (1999) for example, analyse the cultural differences between Chinese and Australian students; Rogers et al (2006) examine the implications of differences between American and Chinese culture for distance learning.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature in this field by providing a case study in the China-UK context, which is based on a Master's degree in law (LLM) programme proposed by Plymouth University for a university in China. It is planned that the delivery will include elements of distance learning and in this paper the authors examine the implications of the existence of differences between the Chinese and British academic cultures for such distance learning. It is hoped that the paper will provide some insight that might inform approaches for enhancing the effectiveness of distance learning in a cross-cultural environment that pertains to Chinese learners and UK educators.

In light of the above, this paper attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) To shed some light on some differences between the academic cultures of China and the UK that may have particular impact on distance learning;
- (2) To identify and examine commonalities and gaps between the perceptions and preferences of the UK deliverers and the Chinese receivers in distance learning with regard to delivery methods and approaches;
- (3) To analyse the implications of these gaps and to identify solutions for filling the gaps;
- (4) To provide recommendations for improving design and practice of distance learning initiatives in a Chinese-UK cross-cultural context in an international collaborative programme, for the ultimate purpose of improving the student learning experience and enhancing learning outcomes.

In order to address the above, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 explores some of the literature relating to culture, whilst Section 3 describes the research methods employed in the research and the process of data collection; Section 4 summarises preliminary findings relating to two focus groups: one conducted in the UK, consisting of a number of UK educators and one, conducted in China, consisting of a number of Chinese

learners. Section 5 comprises discussion of further findings that relate specifically to important gaps between the perceptions of the two focus groups. Such gaps are important insofar as they may point to cultural differences that need to be acknowledged and addressed in design considerations of a distance learning course that spans continents and cultures so that the learning, and the student experience of that learning, is maximised. Section 6 comprises further discussion of the differences found between the Chinese and British academic cultures for distance learning, whilst section 7 provides a set of recommendations on how to enhance the effectiveness of such programmes. Finally, concluding remarks are provided in Section 8.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many pedagogic studies have been carried out compare distance learning with face-to-face learning and findings have been highly diverse, with some showing that students receiving online tuition have reported poorer experiences than those receiving face-to-face tuition (e.g., Price et al 2007; Kitto & Higgins 2003, Hara & Kling 2000; Hartley 2002), whilst others claim that there is no difference between the two (e.g., Richardson 2009). It is nevertheless notable that most of these types of studies were contextualised within a single academic culture and that little reference or consideration was made to the differences in academic culture between ‘deliverers’ of the courses and ‘receivers’ where they are continents apart.

Among the large number of authors that do indeed consider issues of culture, Uzuner (2009) asks ‘...how do teachers and students navigate different cultures of learning in these [online] environments? These are the kinds of questions that need specific attention if our aim is to improve distance learning’ and indeed, many studies have been undertaken that may help to address such questions (see for example, Collis 1999; Kim & Bonk, 2002; Lui et al, 2010; McLoughlin, & Oliver, 2000; Reeder et al, 2004; Shattuck, 2005). Uzuner’s question is pertinent in light of the increasing development of distance learning (Hawkridge & Wheeler 2009; Richardson 2009).

As defined by Cortazzi and Jin (1996), academic culture is ‘the systems of beliefs, expectations and cultural practices about how to perform academically’ (p.76). As such, the effects of culture on students’ ability to communicate and participate effectively within academic discourses and communities should be fully recognised and addressed. Therefore, an inquiry about such issues would be especially significant in terms of distance learning, as the salient features of different academic cultures may well be ‘altered’ (either magnified or minimised) by the ‘distance’ as well as by the use of IT as the means of delivering it. It is also possible that the ‘distance’ may well be ‘lengthened’ or ‘shortened’ by the differences in culture. Few studies pertaining to single academic cultures, specifically Chinese academic culture, which, perhaps unlike other aspects of Chinese culture, largely exhibits homogeneity, (e.g., Rastall 2006; Jin & Cortazzi 2006; Volet & Ang 1998; Higgins & Li 2009; Gu & Schweisfurth 2006; Chan 1997; Cheng 2002; Jones 1999; Lee 1996; Price et al, 2011) have hitherto been carried out in the context of distance learning. However, there are some notable exceptions: Zhao et al. (2013) for example, examined the self-regulating ability of Chinese

distance learners. Zhao had earlier, along with McDougall, examined cultural influences on Chinese students' asynchronous online learning (2008); Ku et al. (2003) examined Chinese students' attitudes toward their first online learning experience; a Smith et al. (2000) study found implications for distance education in the study approaches of different Chinese national groups and Thompson & Ku (2005) have examined Chinese graduate students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning; Tu, C. (2001) looked at how Chinese students perceived social presence in an online learning environment. Among the exceptions noted above, the Zhao (2013) study is the most recent, although the focus is solely on self-regulation by students. Therefore, because of increased globalisation, coupled with the fast pace of technological change and what generally appears to be a more positive shift in attitudes by both students and educators towards using technology for learning that has occurred since most of the aforementioned studies were conducted, it is now appropriate to identify any cultural 'gaps' that need to be considered when designing a new, modern distance learning course.

### **3. Research Methods**

A qualitative research approach, which entailed using focus groups, was used in this study. Focus groups were felt to be appropriate, given the availability of the full population from each of two relatively small groups (described below) and the rich data that might be provided using such a method (Laws, 2003).

A Plymouth University staff focus group took place in early 2011. Participants were invited to discuss ideas and perceptions about delivering distance learning programmes for foreign universities and to identify a suitable approach for the LLM programme. An initial set of questions for the focus group was developed following a desk based review of the literature and other sources relating to distance learning and academic culture, which formed the basis for focus group responses. Participants were encouraged to broaden their discussion where relevant so that richer and more comprehensive data might arise from discussion rather than from simple answers to questions<sup>1</sup>.

The group consisted of the six key staff members involved in designing, or who would be involved in delivering, the joint LLM programme. These included three academic teaching staff who taught law, one senior international officer and two staff members who had managerial responsibilities for learning technology. Of the latter, one individual's role focussed on the practical implementation of IT across the campus, whilst the other's role had a more pedagogical focus.

Following the focus group in Plymouth, a focus group of Chinese students from one Chinese university took place in China to identify the Chinese student's perceptions and expectations about distance learning courses provided by foreign universities. The group comprised the full population of eight Maritime Law graduate students who were considering pursuing

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<sup>1</sup> See Lindlof, 2002 for a comprehensive exposition of this point.

postgraduate studies. It was hoped that, based on the key points arising from the two focus groups, some important gaps in perceptions between the deliverers and receivers of distance learning courses might be revealed. The student focus group schedule was constructed after preliminary analysis of the staff focus group responses and taking those responses into account. Additional issues thought to be of particular relevance to students were also included.

Qualitative research methodologies, such as those utilising focus groups, as does this study, have the potential to elicit rich data (Lindlof, 2002; Twinn, 1998). As well as access to the full population for each of the focus groups, this was the primary reason for choosing such a method for this project and rich data was indeed gathered during the data collection phase. Therefore, although each group, staff and students, was relatively small and the responses gleaned cannot therefore be easily generalised beyond this case study, it is suggested that such responses could nevertheless serve as a valid starting point for further consideration of some of the issues related to distance learning across Chinese-UK cultures.

An important ethical issue that arose from this study related to the question of whether the Chinese students would fully understand what was being asked of them and thus whether they could be said to be giving informed consent to participate. However, the issue was mediated by fact that the interviewer was Chinese with fluent English skills and the questions were asked in both Chinese and English. The students responded in English, only rarely seeking clarification for how to express something in English, thus subsequent data transcription from the audio recordings of the focus group discussion was unproblematic.

All participants signed an informed consent form after reading a full, detailed explanation of the research and its purposes. This also included a confidentiality clause that they agreed should be adhered to. Plymouth University ethics guidelines were fully adhered to throughout and overseen by the University ethics committee.

Both focus groups were audio recorded and then fully transcribed. The transcribed responses by each group were then analysed, question by question in order to categorise responses and then each question's responses were subjected to further thematic analysis, after which, themes were cross checked between students and staff to identify differential or aligned responses.

#### **4. Data Results**

The key points arising from the focus group discussions are detailed below. Questions asked or issues raised are noted, followed by a summary of the responses.

##### **4.1 Plymouth University Staff Focus Group**

Despite the small size of this group, the responses to the focus group questions were wide ranging, indicating perhaps the varied nature of the roles the members.

***Question 1: What does a perfect distance learning package look like?***

Responses focussed on four main issues: provision of materials, assessment, student support and face-to-face elements. Half of the group felt that all the materials should be instantly available to students from the outset, although one member raised the issue of threshold concepts and the potential advisability of a more sequential approach to making materials available. One member discussed using open educational resources as a means to limit costs and to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'.

Respondents appeared to largely agree on the need for some form of self-assessment. Additionally, some form of interactive assessment with either peers or tutors was thought necessary. Face-to-face contact with tutors was felt to be desirable, certainly for Chinese students, for whom it was suggested the tutor, or '*Laoshi*', was held in higher esteem than is perhaps the case in the UK. This contact was deemed necessary to meet student support needs. A mechanism for peer support was felt to be 'crucial', as was good organisation and structure. Respondents also felt that there needed to be a robust and informative system of induction.

***Question 2: What technology or combination of technologies do you think should be used, or should content determine the means?***

A website and set of web based resources was suggested and one respondent suggested that provision of 'full virtual replacement of lectures and tutorials' could be provided via YouTube. Other suggestions included Skype or instant messaging for student support. Email was felt to entail delay in terms of student support. It was suggested that a distance learning course should not be designed around technology but that the 'pedagogical model on which the course sits' should be paramount.

Online conferences via Skype for example, were felt to be important for teaching and for student/tutor interaction, as well as online forums for posting discussions and questions. It was asserted that whatever technologies were used, they should be easily updateable and be compatible with technologies in other countries.

***Question 3: Should any face-to-face teaching or tutorials be part of a Distance Learning course? If so, what would be the right proportion?***

The incorporation of residential weekends was a suggestion by one respondent, to deal with those aspects that are best dealt with face-to-face. There were suggestions that a blended model should be adopted, although geographical proximity, or rather, lack thereof in a distance learning course, was felt to be a factor that might inhibit take up of any face-to-face teaching sessions or tutorials. It was suggested that local tutor support might be desirable and the facility for quick feedback.



***Question 4: What do you see as possible challenges and how could these be managed?***

Respondents noted the need for quick feedback, good feedback mechanisms and the right support for students. Another challenge was felt to be about expectations of what different cultures learning styles would be. One respondent expressed the view that the implications of culture for distance learning was largely unexplored and that there may therefore be unforeseen challenges.

Financial viability was felt to be important because a lot of the cost would be up front and it was therefore important to have institutional support at the design stage. Indeed, institutional support and its priorities was seen to present the biggest challenge. Setting the right cost was also considered to be a challenge in terms of what it might cost to provide, compared to what needed to be charged and which potential students would be prepared to pay. Other challenges included developing as flexible a pedagogic model as possible.

***Question 5: What are the advantages and disadvantages of Distance Learning?***

Respondents felt that distance learning enabled overseas students to get a British degree without the additional cost of living abroad. Flexibility was agreed to be an advantage. The availability of free content was felt to be an advantage. Repeatability of learning articles such as podcasts, videos etc. was felt to be useful and for student, the ability to stop or restart a recorded lecture was felt to be advantageous<sup>2</sup>.

In terms of disadvantages, attrition rates for distance learning were considered but felt to be a function of the support that students received. Fewer opportunities for interactivity in distance learning compared to those available in face-to-face learning was felt to be a disadvantage and the view was expressed that students were more able to 'hide' from the tutor online, making it difficult to identify struggling students. The impersonal nature of distance learning was seen as a disadvantage and one respondent stated, imagining himself as a student, 'I would value my interactions with my tutor, to explore ideas and I'm not sure how that could be replicated in a distance learning model.' Time zone differentials were thought to be a disadvantage in terms of providing tutor support and giving timely feedback to students. Such disadvantages could, it was suggested, be compounded in the case of technology failures.

***Question 6: What do you think the students are looking for in a Distance Learning course?***

Respondents agreed that students wanted convenience and flexibility. One respondent said that some students would undertake distance learning because it can be built around employment.

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<sup>2</sup> This point is borne out by research by Albion et al, 2010.



***Question 7: Any other issues we should consider when we design and deliver a Distance Learning course?***

One respondent stated that one needed to be quite clear about longevity and that failures, repeats and withdrawals may need to be factored into the design so that modules which may need to be available in later years, can be so – or their equivalents. Another respondent suggested that designers should be informed by work that has already been done elsewhere.

**4.2 Chinese Potential Distance Learning Receiver's Focus Group**

In the student focus group discussion, eight thematic issues were addressed as follows. Further issues that emerged from the data are discussed in section 5.

***Issue 1: Advantages and disadvantages***

Flexibility was felt to be a key advantage and that online study for a British degree would avoid the need to spend time getting used to a new cultural environment and would cost less.

A concern was expressed about self-discipline and self-regulating ones learning. Students were also concerned about how employers might perceive the value of an online degree. Reputation associated with the degree and the awarding body was felt to be highly important, as was ensuring that a degree gained by means of distance learning was equivalent to one achieved by traditional study methods. Similarly, students expressed the concern that distance learning tutors should have the same level of expertise and experience as traditional face-to-face lecturers. Other concerns centred on communication mechanisms, particularly across different time zones.

***Issue 2: Delivery technologies***

Communication with a tutor was felt to be important and interactivity was felt to be valuable for ensuring that students felt they were part of a class 'atmosphere'. It was acknowledged that time zone differentials might make interactivity difficult and a suitable video conferencing technology to enable interactivity not easily identifiable. Internet speeds were seen as a potential problem. Recorded versions of lectures were considered to be valuable because of their repeatability.<sup>3</sup>

Some technologies in use in the UK and elsewhere are not readily available in China, e.g., Facebook and YouTube. A potential substitute for YouTube was considered to be Youku and the Chinese equivalent to Facebook was cited as Renren. All students were able to access MSN and Gtalk and to use Skype, although concerns were expressed about Skype being slow and audibly unclear. Other technologies mentioned were Talkbox, a freely available cell phone voicemail type software, accessible on iphones and Android cell phones via wifi

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<sup>3</sup> This point is borne out by research by Albion et al, 2010

technology, and BBS (Bulletin Board System), an online service whereby users can read news and exchange messages with others. In terms of one-to-one communication, email and telephone were suitable technologies.

Students felt that public access to their course material, for example, via Open Educational Resources, lessened the value of it. One student stated 'I pay but others don't and they can see it.' Password access to course materials and resources was suggested as a means to overcome this, as was the 'school FTP', which is 'a kind of cloud', as one student stated. It was felt that course materials could be made available via such web based means.

### ***Issue 3: Delivery methods***

As the theme of this issue is somewhat interrelated with the previous one, some responses to the previous theme also relate to elements within this themed issue.

Students wanted all course materials available at the start of the course as this was what they were familiar with. Group discussion was felt to be valuable as an aid to learning and as a means for clarifying issues with other students and with the tutor, if present, whether self or tutor organised and whether in or after defined class time. Moreover, students stated that they were already familiar with group coursework, which often necessitated this. However, students felt this might be difficult in a distance learning course because students may be geographically separated and may not know who fellow students were. QQ technology, an instant chat tool in China, was felt to be an appropriate mechanism for this. Students felt that it would be advantageous to incorporate residential weekends and would like them quarterly, although they were aware of feasibility issues.

### ***Issue 4: Support***

Students were unanimous in their desire to have local tutor support for ease of contact, which they felt was important. Such a tutor, it was felt, would provide psychological support as well as support for study problems and would be well placed to monitor their progress. Contact could be by both email and face-to-face contact.

In terms of peer support, students stated that they liked to discuss issues and share information among themselves and were used to completing group tasks but that if they had unanswered questions, they would like to be able to ask the tutor. If peer discussion was found to be necessary, QQ was the preferred means of enabling it if a face-to-face meeting was not possible.

### ***Issue 5: Questions***

When asked how they usually found out things, students were unanimous in their responses: first Google, then second, Baidu, a Chinese search engine, followed by using the library, then asking their friends and fellow students and finally by asking their professors.

All agreed that asking questions would be easier via distance learning than face-to-face. Students felt that if their 'professor' didn't know them, then it would be easier to ask questions but that if they felt the questions might open them to ridicule, they would look for information via Google. They felt that email might enable them to 'organise [our] words' more clearly than when in face-to-face situations. When asked if this was preferable to telephone contact, understanding the professor, who may not speak Chinese, was raised as a possible issue, as was audio quality and the potential difficulty of 'getting a line'.

A desirable response time for emails was suggested as three working days.

### ***Issue 6: Assessment***

Students stated that they would like an equal combination of exams and coursework, weighted at 50% for each. When asked about peer assessment, students expressed concern about the impact of peer assessment on personal relationships and for this reason, whilst they may be happy to give feedback, would not like to award marks.

### ***Issue 7: Feedback***

Students all agreed they would like to receive feedback via email. Students were apparently used to getting assessment feedback within a week in China and after some explanation about the system in Plymouth, suggested that twenty working days was an acceptable time to wait for feedback, although notably, one student had initially stated that at twenty days, she would probably have forgotten what she had written.

Students felt that the tutor could ask questions after lectures, as this would help to check progress and understanding.

### ***Issue 8: Course mode, induction, teaching and cost.***

There was unanimous agreement for part-time mode. It was felt that induction should include elements about how they would be assessed ('How the lecturer will mark'); how much material they would be expected to read; how many modules there were and what was included in the syllabus for each; what approach they needed to take to address any problems and what rules were applicable – as one respondent put it: 'the lecturers requirements'.

Whilst students felt that a good tutor was important, the reputation of the university offering the course was also felt to be very important. Ultimately though, teaching quality was felt to be the most important. One student argued that it really depended on what the students major was and in Law, reputation was important. The student argued that if studying with a local professor whose network was in the students chosen career field, then reputation was important but that if the tutor was based in the UK their network might not be so important to the student and therefore they would 'prefer to learn more from good quality teaching'.

In terms of cost, students felt that for a one year, full time distance learning Master's course, about £5000 was reasonable and would be lower than that charged for full time study at a Chinese university, where the cost might be somewhere in the region of £8000 per year.

## **5. Gaps in perceptions and their implications**

Although there are a number of identifiable commonalities and areas of agreement, the areas of disagreement, or gaps in perceptions between UK staff and Chinese students, perhaps provide greater insight into both cultural and other issues in designing distance learning. Such insight may give providers of distance education reason to think very carefully about how they structure and design their courses when cultural and other issues raised by this study are considered (Lui et al, 2010). This section highlights additional responses not noted above and includes some brief discussion.

### ***Open Educational Resources***

There is a current trend towards Open Educational Resources (OER) among some educators (Brown, 2010; Hodgkinson-Williams, 2010; Petrides et al. 2010) and particularly those delivering online and distance education. However, in this study, whilst staff voiced support for OER, Chinese students felt that they would 'not like to pay for things that others can see for free' (Student 1). They also felt that public access to their course material in some sense, diminished the educational value of it. Given the importance of notions of authority in Chinese educational culture, where the *Laoshi*, or teacher, is accorded deference and respect due to their experience (Alon & McIntyre, 2005), this is perhaps unsurprising. Passing the national exam and being qualified to enter higher education is extremely difficult and competitive for students in China, and thus Chinese students expect to be taught by tutors with good, scholarly reputations and so course materials, derived from authoritative scholarly endeavours such as those in peer reviewed journals, would have a high value. It is therefore possible that freely available resources, not recognised as clearly by the students as such authoritative scholarly endeavours, could be seen to have less value.

### ***Materials***

Some individuals in the staff focus group felt that materials should be provided sequentially because of concerns about students grasping threshold concepts before moving on to more advanced materials. However, all the Chinese students said that they wanted all materials at the '...beginning of the course' (Student 1) because that is what they were familiar with in their higher education system and they are used to reading through the materials at the beginning of the course in order to comprehend in some depth, what will be taught during the course.

### ***Technology***

The issue of technological gaps was raised: YouTube for delivering recorded lectures was suggested by staff but this, as well as Facebook, is not available in China. Skype was suggested by staff but Chinese students felt that audio quality was poor: 'We can't hear each

other well and it's maybe not very stable' (Student 2). Other technological gaps became evident when one student, when discussing how classes might be delivered, stated that 'The speed of the internet is highly demanding and we don't have it (video conferencing) in our homes' (Student 4). It is important to note therefore, that technologies that inhabitants of the UK can access and are very familiar with are much less accessible or familiar to Chinese students.

### ***Email and language***

Staff felt that email might not offer a quick enough response to students. However, the students felt that three days was an acceptable timescale for responses to emails and that students could 'organise their words better using email' (Student 1). This view is supported by other research, which shows that where students are learning using a second language, sufficient opportunities need to be accorded for adequate translation. (Devlin, 2007; Dillon et.al. 2007; Smith et.al. 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001; Wang et al, 2007)

### ***Feedback***

In terms of the issue of timeliness, Chinese participants in this study suggested that they were used to getting feedback within five days and when Plymouth return and feedback times were raised by the interviewer (circa 20 days), all students strongly expressed surprise and one student said: 'If it's 20 working days I'd almost forget what I wrote' (Student 4). Although the Plymouth staff stated that quick feedback mechanisms were essential, it is not clear whether they had five days in mind. Indeed, it is unlikely because in UK universities generally, it seems that weeks, rather than days may be the norm for such matters (NSS, 2011).

### ***Peer assessment***

Chinese students, unlike the Plymouth staff, did not favour peer assessment and in fact were sure that they would *not* like to do it, stating that although they would not like to give grades, they might be prepared to give peer feedback: 'I think feedback is OK but I don't want to mark' (Student 2) and when anonymous peer assessment was mentioned by the interviewer, one student stated 'But I would know I was giving low marks to someone' (Student 3). This is consistent with much of the literature about peer assessment (see, for example, Cheng and Warren, 1997; Falchikov, 1996; Greenan *et al* 1997; Lin *et al.*, 2001; Ngu, 1995; Reynolds and Trehan, 2000; Sluijsmans *et al.* 2001; Tsai *et al.*, 2002) The dislike of the notion of peer assessment, whilst not uncommon, is perhaps even less unsurprising in China, where deference to those more learned or experienced, to those in authority and to elders, is inherent in, and integral to, cultural and societal relations (Alon & McIntyre, 2005).

### ***Reputation***

Chinese students held strongly expressed views about the importance of reputation, in terms of the educational institution, the type of degree as well as the tutors delivering it, which would appear to be consistent with what is understood about Chinese education, that there is an emphasis on deference to the greater wisdom and authority of the *Laoshi*, or teacher. In such situations, reputation is highly important. Students commented that 'The reputation of

the university is important' (Student 4); '...whether the diploma of the course will be highly estimated in China. If my boss doesn't know the university, they won't say that the diploma is really good. That is a concern' (Student 2) and '...in Law, it is very important whether your tutor has a very good reputation' (Student 2).

### ***General differences of perspective due to roles rather than culture***

Although some issues have been identified in this study as important to both students and staff, though perhaps for different reasons, for the most part they reflect the roles and priorities that each group might ordinarily be expected to have. For example, staff suggested that induction could be used to aid student retention, whilst students saw it as a sort of 'signposting' event that would help to set out what was expected of them and how the course and their work for it would be organised. Neither view precludes the other but this raises the issue about how educators may need to endeavour to understand student's needs in terms of organisation.

The staff focus group perhaps understandably, took a largely strategic approach to the subject of distance, whilst students were more focused on how they would receive the course and were more concerned with the impact on themselves and their future careers.

## **6. Further Discussion**

An in-depth analysis of the data that is set out in Section 4 shows that there were a number of commonalities in perception between the Chinese and Plymouth respondents. However, as demonstrated clearly in Section 5, there were notable gaps in perception that are attributable to issues of culture. These cannot be dismissed as trivial and unimportant – any perceptions by designers of distance learning that they could utilise technologies such as YouTube for distance learning students based in China for example, would patently fail. Such designers therefore need to make themselves aware of the technologies available to their target population.

### ***Technology and resources***

The issue of technology for distance learning, whilst somewhat indirectly related to culture, inasmuch as the culture determines what technologies are made available, is more about practical considerations than culture *per se*. As shown in this study, the issue of culture becomes more readily apparent when one considers issues such as teaching, time issues and language.

This study demonstrates that UK designers of distance learning courses for Chinese students, as well as taking into consideration the availability of the technologies that are available, need to take into account factors such as reputation, an element not usually considered in depth when designing courses for home, or UK students. For Chinese students, the value of the degree and the reputation of the teacher and awarding institution were felt to be important. Therefore, although utilising OERs may be an attractive option to UK designers, they may want to consider whether these might deter Chinese students from enrolling on a



course that incorporated them. The students in this study were not in favour of OERs because by the very nature of the openness and free availability of OERs and their perception that they may be less scholarly than non OER works, any use of them would, it was felt, devalue their course. The implication is that for those students, open resources might not be seen to be as reputable as those exclusively available to them. This appears to be about preserving authority and expertise, highly valued elements in Chinese culture. It will therefore be interesting to see whether the trend towards Massive Open Online Courses will impact on Chinese students' perceptions about OERs in the future.

### ***Reputation and peer assessment***

It is these highly valued elements that need to be taken into account in any consideration of incorporating peer assessment into distance learning. The students in this study did not feel that they would like to mark their peers' work, although they would be prepared to give feedback. There seem to be two elements in play here: firstly, the issue previously noted about the respect given to the *Laoshi* in Chinese educational culture and the secondly, an issue about personal relationships (Miller, 2005), or '*Guanxi*' in Chinese: students may worry that giving low marks, if they had to, might damage their relationship with their classmates.

These elements need consideration at every stage of course design so that the student learning experience is, as far as possible, not compromised.

A related element that might need to be considered, and which is indirectly linked to reputation and the issue of relationships as discussed above, is that of the Chinese concept of 'face'. This is a deeply entrenched cultural aspect of Chinese social relations, which Lin Yutang describes thus: 'Abstract and intangible, it is yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated.' (Lin 1935). Although not specifically mentioned by the students in this study, it was nevertheless implicitly evident in their responses.

In Chinese culture, face is *Mianzi*, generally connoting reputation, self-respect, prestige, honor; social status. As Huang (1987, p.73) explained, 'Succinctly, among college subjects, loss of *Mianzi* is...tied to failure to measure up to one's sense of self-esteem or to what is expected by others.' This is important because in Chinese contexts an individual's merit, worth, and value are ascribed through academic performance (China Civilisation Centre 2007, cited in Brown and Wang, 2011). Another author, Miller (2005), notes that Tae-Seop Lim and John Waite Bowers (1991) have claimed that face is the public image that a person claims for himself. They assert that there are three important elements to the concept of face: 'Autonomy face', the desire to appear 'independent, in control, and responsible'; 'Fellowship face', the 'desire to seem cooperative, accepted, and loved' and 'Competence face', the desire to appear intelligent, accomplished, and capable (Miller, 2005). Furthermore, Masumoto et al. (2000) defined 'facework' as 'the communicative strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face'. Facework thus refers to an individual's identity and how that identity is created, reinforced, diminished and maintained in social and communicative interactions.



The concept of face is thus implicitly evident in the Chinese students concerns about reputation and peer assessment. In respect of peer assessment, it was not that the Chinese students worried so much about what they thought about themselves but about what they thought others might think of them – in this case, their peers. When considering communication with tutors, the concern shifted to what the *Laoshi*, accorded high *Mianzi*, might think. It is therefore important that designers of distance learning for Chinese students factor this into their considerations of what might be appropriate and acceptable to Chinese students of such courses.

### ***Timing***

The timing of various elements of distance learning should also be an important consideration for designers: consideration needs to be given to the timing of those elements within the target culture and whether these could be matched by the deliverers of distance learning courses. The Chinese respondents in this project were used to having all their course materials up front and assessment feedback in their home country was usually given within five days. For the latter at least, there is clearly a mismatch between practice in China and the UK that should be taken into account and somehow mediated.

### ***Language***

Considerations about language in the design of distance learning courses are important: various studies have shown that for students whose first language is not the language of the learning being delivered, more time is needed to learn than for other students (Devlin, 2007; Dillon et.al. 2007; Smith et.al. 2005; Thomson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001; Wang et al, 2007). Time is needed to translate the second language material into the first language before sense can be made of it. This has implications for tutor/student verbal contact: if the tutor is not fluent in the student's first language and the student has to speak to the tutor in a second language, this may lead to less frequent or lower quality contact than may be desirable if the student avoids such contact because they lack confidence in their mastery of the second language. The point is illustrated well in the comment of one Chinese respondent who said that email would allow them to 'organise their words better' (Student 1). Course designers therefore need to allow sufficient time for learning by students for whom the delivery language is not their first language and need to consider whether some forms of student/staff contact may be preferable to others in order to mitigate some of the difficulties for students.

## **7. Recommendations**

The authors' recommendations for bridging the cultural gaps in distance learning, based on the issues raised in the study and noted above, are as follows:

- Distance learning course designers need to be aware of the technologies available to their target population;
- Educators need to endeavour to understand Chinese student's needs in terms of organisation for effective study;

- Distance learning course designers need to consider reputational factors to ensure that the value of the degree is maximised;
- Distance learning course designers need to consider whether OERs might deter Chinese students from enrolling on a course;
- Chinese perceptions about authority and expertise need to be taken into account at every stage in the design of distance learning courses so that the student learning experience is, as far as possible, not compromised;
- The Chinese notion of '*Guanxi*' and 'face' needs to be taken into account when considering incorporating peer assessment into a distance learning course for Chinese students;
- The feasibility of fast assessment feedback should be addressed by designers and deliverers of distance learning for Chinese students in order to facilitate a satisfactory learning experience for Chinese students;
- Designers of distance learning courses need to allow sufficient time for learning by students for whom the delivery language is not their first language;
- Course designers need to consider whether some forms of student/staff contact may be preferable to others in order to mitigate some of the difficulties for students studying in a second language.
- It is important that the notion of 'face' is considered when designing distance learning courses for Chinese students.

Finally, the issue of institutional support cannot be overstated. Without such support, in terms of the provision of sufficient resources to adequately enable distance learning that uses online and other technologies, such courses may struggle and even fail to be satisfactorily delivered, thus potentially impacting on the reputation of the delivering institution. Nevertheless, with adequate support and resources, the opportunities to all parties afforded by distance learning that bridges cultures could be significant.

## **8 Concluding remarks**

Although small scale, this case study has highlighted some differences between the academic cultures of China and the UK that may have particular impact on distance learning, such as the differences in attitudes accorded by Chinese students and UK academic staff to such elements as OERs and access to freely available materials.

The study identified some commonalities and gaps between the perceptions and preferences of the UK deliverers and potential Chinese receivers of distance learning in respect of delivery methods and approaches, particularly in terms of the technology that might be used for delivering distance learning.

The authors have analysed the implications of these gaps in order to identify potential solutions for improving design and practice of distance learning initiatives in a Chinese-UK cross-cultural context in an international collaborative programme. The recommendations

provided in section 7 are indicative of these and it is hoped that adopting these may help to improve the student learning experience and enhancing learning outcomes.

As demonstrated above, a number of interesting themes emerged from the data and the authors, cognisant of the small scale nature of this study, hope to undertake further, more nuanced and larger scale research in order to follow up some of these.

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